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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women

Statement submitted by Society for Women and AIDS in Africa, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2008/1.



Statement

Despite many noble interventions aimed at ensuring gender equality and the empowerment of women, women and girls continue to have much less access to resources than their male counterparts, particularly when it comes to facing the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The abysmal allocation of resources directed specifically to civil society programs targeting women and girls is disappointing. It is also worrying that such funds, when available, remain largely in the hands of northern non-profit organizations to the detriment of the southern ones. This lack of resources limits the creation and implementation of locally initiated programs that would ensure a much more sustainable approach to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls from the global South.

Over-whelming evidence indicates to us that women and girls remain the poorest among the poor, the most uneducated and enjoy less access to medical treatment and support. Women are severely under-represented in decision-making processes and leadership positions, particularly when it comes to budgeting at the governmental level. Gender-neutral financial decisions globally, nationally and locally are facilitating the perpetuation of this unacceptable status quo.

We understand that economic dependency on men and socio-cultural factors as well as poverty, conflict and illiteracy have conspired to disempower women, rendering them behind men when it comes to enjoying basic needs as well as personal autonomy. The basic right to have control over one's own sexual safety has often been taken away from women and girls. Systemic gender violence in the forms of early marriage, trafficking, genocidal rape and other forms of sexual abuse, as well as economic and even legislative violence puts women in positions where they are at the highest risks of being HIV infected.

In the political Declaration on HIV/AIDS of the General Assembly of June 2006, the governments noted that HIV/AIDS is "an unprecedented human catastrophe" and that it "constitutes a global emergency and poses one of the most formidable challenges to the development, progress and stability of our respective societies and the world at large, and requires an exceptional and comprehensive global response."

A global response cannot be "comprehensive" or successful until it specifically includes women and girls in its design. We welcome all the effort that has been made to address the pandemic and we recognize that some significant progress has been made in some areas. But the reality is that women and girls have less access than their male counterparts to medical attention, retroviral drugs, food and sexual education. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to initiating research and programs that will specifically target women and girls and will empower them to be actively involved in their own sexual safety.

Despite extremely limited resources, women around the globe, in particular in Africa, have found enough strength, passion and creativity to take on an active role regarding HIV/AIDS. Women have taken dramatic steps, towards identifying their specific needs, concerns, some best practices and have initiated a number of valuable advocacy networks, grass roots level programs and other mechanisms

designed to achieve gender equality when it comes to HIV/AIDS with the ultimate goal of halting the epidemic altogether.

Since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the international community, in particular the UN, has formally registered its concern for the inequality of women and girls and has been increasingly responsive to it. We recall the Millennium Development Goals, in particular Goal 3, "to promote gender equality and empower women," Goal 5, "improve maternal Health" and Goal 6 "combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases." The Beijing Platform for Action and the following agreed conclusions of the CSWs emphasize that funding has to be identified and mobilized from all sources and across all sectors to promote women and girls access to education, health, economic empowerment, safety and human rights in general.

We welcome these words and recognize that some advances have been made wherever and whenever substantial resources have been allocated. But greater effort must be made when allocating financial resources across the globe, to ensure that women and girls' needs are met and that they are included in all decision making processes that concern them in any form, shape or manner. Progress towards achieving gender equality across the world would ultimately benefit not only women and girls, but will enhance the well-being of the entire global community as well.

Therefore we urge the international community and governments to ensure adequate financial resources to:

1. Integrate women in decision making processes from the local to the highest levels of policy making, in particular when it comes to budgeting, as a means to ensure that women's particular needs will be properly addressed.
2. Integrate women, in particular women living with HIV/AIDS, in all decision-making processes designed to address the pandemic of HIV/AIDS at local, national and international level.
3. Adequately fund existing mechanisms, especially those led by local women, and create new ones when necessary that promote gender equality at all levels, in particular:
 - Providing education for girls and women.
 - Promoting economic empowerment of women.
 - Ensuring that women and girls have access to the basic needs: housing, food, potable water and health services.
 - Ensuring safety for all women and girls and firmly prosecuting the perpetrators of crimes of gender violence in any shape or form.

4. Allocate more resources in the fight against HIV/AIDS aiming at prevention and universal access to antiretroviral drugs and care and support in general, in particular for women and girls, with a focus on those mechanisms that will ensure that women have the capacity to control their own sexual safety; and that address the specific reproductive and sexual needs and concerns of women and girls. These include:
 - Female condoms.
 - Microbicides.
 - Mother-to-child transmission.
 - Science-based preventive education geared towards women and girls.
 - Psychosocial and emotional care for HIV positive women and girls.
 - HIV/AIDS medical and scientific research that keeps at its center the female body.
 - Conferences, networks, organizations or any mechanisms that allow women to share experiences, new concerns and best practices.
5. Ensure adequate human and financial resources, in the event of armed conflict and during peace processes, to implement those policies and support existing mechanisms that focus on the needs of women and girls specially when it comes to:
 - Ensuring safety of women and girls in refugee camps and their access to all services, special medical treatment, in particular when it comes to sexual and reproductive care.
 - Providing psychosocial and emotional care of women and girls affected in any way by conflict. In particular ensuring the reintegration of girls and women soldiers, and those subject to forced prostitution or genocidal rape.
 - Implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000).

Further, we encourage the international community and governments to:

1. Integrate in the budgeting process systematic evaluations on how “gender-neutral” policies may affect women differently than men and address any further asymmetry among men and women and boys and girls that those policies might bring upon.
2. Encourage civil society and multinationals to include programs and activities that promote gender equality and equal access to resources for women and girls.
3. Promote partnerships with and financial support of existing community-based and women-initiated programs, and promote the creation of new ones when necessary, that aim at

achieving gender equality, in order to encourage the emergence of local female leadership and to better ensure the sustainability of those programs.

We strongly believe that empowered, educated and healthy women and girls will benefit the entire community and help create a strong, stable society and a prosperous economy and we are fully committed to work towards that goal.

We support all implementation of economic, social and security policies that keep human rights at the center as a priority. Our NGOs are ready to partner with governments in the implementation or creation, when necessary, of such policies that will do so while supporting gender equality in all ways, in particular when it comes to sexual and reproductive rights.

Note: Statement endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council: FEMvision; Grail; Human Lactation Center; International Council of Jewish Women; International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse; People's Decade of Human Rights Education; Pan Pacific and Southeast Asia Women's Association; and World Federation for Mental Health.